

A Calvinist's Understanding of "Free Will"

By [C. Michael Patton](#)

There are many words and concepts in theology that suffer from misunderstanding, mis-characterization, and misinformation. "Predestination," "Calvinism," "Total Depravity," "Inerrancy," and "Complementarianism", just to name a few that I personally have to deal with. Proponents are more often than not on the defensive, having to explain again and again why it is they don't mean what people *think* they mean.

The concept of "free will" suffers no less with regard to this misunderstanding. Does a person have free will? Well, what do *you* mean by "free will"? This must always be asked.

Do you mean:

1. That a person is not *forced* from the *outside* to make a choice?
2. That a person is responsible for his or her choices?
3. That a person is the active agent in a choice made?
4. That a person is free to do whatever they desire?
5. That a person has the ability to choose contrary to their nature (who they are)?

Calvinists, such as myself, *do* believe in free will and we *don't* believe in free will. It just depends on what you mean.

When it comes to the first three options, most Calvinists would agree that a person is not forced to make a choice, is responsible for their choices, and is the active agent behind those choices. They would reject the fourth believing that a person is *not* free to do *whatever* they desire (for example, no matter how much one desires, he or she cannot read the thoughts of another person, fly without wings, or transport from one location to another just by thinking about the desired location).

It is important to note at this point, there is no conflict. No matter what theological persuasion you adhere to, most of historic Christianity has agreed that the first three are true, while the fourth is false.

It is with the fifth option there is disagreement.

Does a person have the ability to choose against their nature?

This question gets to the heart of the issue. Here we introduce a new and more defined term (hang with me here): “Libertarian Free-will” or “Libertarian Freedom.” *Libertarian* freedom can be defined briefly thus:

Libertarian Freedom: “The power of contrary choice.”

If you ask whether a person can choose against their nature (i.e. libertarian freedom) the answer, I believe, must be “no.” A person’s nature makes up who they are. *Who they are* determines their choice. If their choice is determined, then the freedom is *self*-limited. Therefore, there is no “power” of contrary choice for we cannot identify what or who this “power” might be. I know, I know . . . slow down. Let me explain.

First, it is important to get this out of the way. To associate this denial of libertarian freedom exclusively with Calvinism would be misleading. St. Augustine was the first to deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner. Until the fourth century, it was simply assumed that people were free and responsible, but they had yet to flesh out what this meant. Augustine further elaborated on the Christian understanding of freedom. He argued that people choose according to who they are. If they are good, they make good choices. If they are bad, they make bad choices. These choices *are* free, they just lack liberty. In other words, a person does not become a sinner because they sin, they sin because they are a sinner. It is an issue of nature first. If people are identified with the fallen nature of Adam, then they will make choices similar to that of Adam because it is who they are. Yes, *they* are making a free choice, but this choice does not include the liberty or freedom of contrary choice.

What you have to ask is this: If “free will” means that we can choose against our nature (i.e. the power of contrary choice), if “free will” means that we can choose against *who we are*, what does this mean? What does this look like? How does a free person make a choice that is contrary to who they are? *Who* is actually making the choice? What is “free will” in this paradigm?

If one can choose according to who they are not, then they are not making the choice and this is not really freedom at all, no? Therefore, there is, at the very least, a *self*-determinism at work here. This is a limit on free will and, therefore, a necessary denial of true libertarian freedom.

Think about all that goes into making “who you are.” We are born in the fallen line of Adam. Spiritually speaking we have an inbred inclination toward sin. All of our being is infected with sin. This is called “total depravity.” Every aspect of our being is infected with sin, even if we don’t act it out to a maximal degree.

But even if this were not the case,—even if total depravity were a false doctrine—libertarian freedom would still be untenable. Not only are you who you are because of your identification with a fallen human race, but notice all these factors *that you did not choose* that go into the set up for any given “free will” decision made:

- You did not choose when you were to be born.
- You did not choose where you were to be born.
- You did not choose your parents.
- You did not choose your influences early in your life.
- You did not choose whether you were to be male or female.
- You did not choose your genetics.
- You did not choose your temperament.
- You did not choose your looks.
- You did not choose your body type.
- You did not choose your physical abilities.

All of these factors play an influencing role in who you are at the time of any given decision. Yes, your choice is free, but it has *you* behind them. Therefore, you are free to choose according to *you* from whom you are not able to free yourself!

Now, I must reveal something here once again that might surprise many of you. This view is held by both Calvinists and Arminians alike. Neither position believes that a person can choose against their nature. Arminians, however, differ from Calvinists in that they believe in the doctrine of prevenient grace, which essentially neutralizes the will so that the inclination toward sin—the antagonism toward God—is relieved so that the person can make a true “free will” decision.

However, we still have some massive difficulties. Here are a couple:

A neutralized will amounts to *your* absence from the choice itself.

Changing the nature of a person so that their predispositions are neutral does not really help. We are back to the question *What does a neutralized will look like?* Does it erase all of the *you* behind the choice? If you are neutralized and liberated from you, then who is making the choice? How can you be held responsible for a choice that you did not really make, whether good or bad? A neutralized will amounts to perpetual indecision. Think about this, if a person had true libertarian freedom, where there were no coercive forces, personal or divine, that influenced the decision, would a choice ever be made? If you have no reason to choose A or B, then neither would ever be chosen. Ronald Nash illustrates this by presenting a dog who has true libertarian freedom trying to decide between two bowls of dog food. He says that the dog would end up dying of starvation. Why? Because he would never have any reason to choose one over the other. It is like a balanced scale, it will never tilt to the right or the left

unless the weights (influence) on one side is greater than the other. Then, no matter how little weight (influence) is added to a balanced scale, it will always choose accordingly.

A neutralized will amounts to arbitrary decisions, which one cannot be held responsible for.

For the sake of argument, let's say that libertarian choice could be made. Let's say that the dog did choose one food bowl over the other. In a truly libertarian sense, this decision cannot have influences of any kind. Any decision without influences is arbitrary. It would be like flipping a coin. I chose A rather than B, not because of who I am, but for *no reason at all*. It just turned out that way. But this option is clearly outside a biblical worldview of responsibility and judgment. Therefore, in my opinion, the outcome for the fight for true libertarian free-will comes at the expense of true responsibility!

In conclusion: while I believe in free will, I don't believe in *libertarian* free will. We make the choices we make because of who we are. We are responsible for these choices. God will judge each person accordingly with a righteous judgment. Is there tension? Absolutely. We hold in tension our belief in God's sovereignty, determining who we are, when we live, where we will live, who our parents will be, our DNA, etc. and human responsibility. While this might seem uncomfortable, I believe that it is not only the best biblical option, but the only philosophical option outside of fatalism, and we don't want to go there.

Acts 17:26-28

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 "For in him we live and move and have our being."

Thoughts? Do you believe in free will?

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